SPORT, GENDER AND SEXUALITY AT THE 1908 LONDON OLYMPIC GAMES

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At the 2012 Olympic Games in London, a small revolution in gendered sport seems to have taken place. For the first time, women were allowed to compete in every sport on the programme. Boxing was perhaps the most symbolic event. The arrival of women in the ring intimated that the old Olympic model of what a sportswoman should be like was being laid to rest, while the admission of women into such a masculine preserve was a tacit recognition that the lines distinguishing male from female sport were becoming blurred. This suggests a breakdown in the culture of separate sporting spheres that had dominated the Olympic Games for so long.

This breakdown is perhaps not quite as radical as it initially appears. Even with all sports open to women, the ratio of male to female competitors at 2012 was still not 50:50. Only eventing allows men and women to compete in mixed teams with no distinctions, unlike, for example, mixed doubles in tennis, played to three sets rather than five. When men and women compete together in the Olympics’ only mixed aesthetic sport, the winter sport of ice dancing, they assume heteronormative roles, with the man as the leader and the woman as the led. Women have fewer disciplines open to them than men in athletics, cycling, and swimming, and men are barred from rhythmic gymnastics and synchronised swimming. The masculine Olympic motto of Citius, Altitus, Fortius (‘Faster, Higher, Stronger’) still dominates. Meanwhile, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is yet to have a female president. The intrusive sex test for female athletes, created in the 1960s, has now gone, but the IOC is still grappling with transgenderism and hyperandrogenism.

This snapshot suggests that we are in a period of change, a time in which the IOC is becoming more flexible, more aware of nuances, and more open to debate on issues that, for much of Olympic history, have not been negotiable; but some of the old ways are still entrenched.

The keynote for this conservative tradition comes from the founder of the IOC, Pierre de Coubertin. In July 1912, Coubertin wrote an article on women and the Olympic Games for his journal, Revue Olympique. Here, he made his clearest statement on the subject of Olympic gender roles:

In our view, this feminine semi-Olympiad is impractical, uninteresting, ungainly, and, I do not hesitate to add, improper. It is not in keeping with my concept of the Olympic Games, in which I believe that we have tried, and must continue to try, to put the
The 1908 London Olympic Games

following expression into practice: the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism, based on internationalism, by means of fairness, in an artistic setting, with the applause of women as a reward.

(Coubertin, 1912, p.713)

He maintained his ‘wariness of feminism’ (Coubertin, 1928, p.189), and as late as 1935, he repeated his ideal that women’s roles at the Olympic Games ‘should be above all to crown the victors’ (Coubertin, 1935, p.583). His view was based in part on his objection to the spectacle: ‘If some women want to play football or box, let them,’ he wrote soon after the 1928 Olympics, ‘provided that the event takes place without spectators, because the spectators who flock to such competitions are not there to watch a sport’ (Coubertin, 1928, p.189). Whatever the basis of his views, they remained entrenched, and did much to shape the IOC’s gender politics in the long term. As Hargreaves (1994, p.209) observed, ‘From the start, the modern Olympics was a context for institutionalized sexism, severely hindering women’s participation. They were a powerful conservatizing force.’

With this in mind, this chapter explores the politics of gender and sexuality at the Games of the 4th Olympiad, held in London in 1908. By taking a case study approach to these Games, which were held in the IOC’s early years when Coubertin’s influence was great, we can explore the proximity between rhetoric and reality.

I have chosen the 1908 Olympics for three reasons. First, these are widely seen as the first recognisably modern Olympic Games, after the experiments of Athens (1896), Paris (1900), St Louis (1904), and the Intercalated Athens Olympics, held in 1906 to mark the tenth anniversary of the first Olympics. The British Olympic Council (BOC), which organised the 1908 Games for the British Olympic Association (BOA), compiled the first comprehensive set of regulations for all sports, including definitions of amateurism and professionalism, and all events were notionally contested by national teams under the control of national committees. Second, the 1908 Olympics included women in various ways. There were more female competitors in more sports than ever before, and some women, notably Queen Alexandra and Lady Desborough, had high profiles in Olympic ceremonies. Yet all this was done within a setting in which male sport was the norm, with male competitors hugely outnumbering female.

These Olympics become even more attractive as a case study when we consider the debates that were going on in Britain at the time. 1908 was one of the high points of the Women’s Social and Political Union’s (WSPU’s) campaign, and some newspapers printed Olympic stories alongside Suffragette stories. For example, the Daily Express carried a picture of the German Olympic skating pair Anna Hübler and Heinrich Burger immediately under an illustrated spread on the WSPU’s demonstration in the House of Commons. The waltzing skaters form a fascinating juxtaposition to the pictures of Helen Fox being escorted to court by two policemen (30 October 1908, p.7). There was a growing acceptance of women in education and medicine, and new kinds of women were being captured in the public imagination by advertisers, artists and novelists. H.G. Wells’ heroine Ann Veronica, who appeared in the eponymous novel in 1909, captured this mood with her desire to break away from convention: ‘The world, she discovered . . . had no particular place for her at all, nothing for her to do, except a functionless existence varied by calls, tennis, selected novels, walks, and dusting in her father’s house’ (Wells, 1909, p.6). For men, too, times were changing. Heterosexuality remained the unspoken norm, and homosexual acts were punishable by imprisonment – although this in itself was some kind of an improvement on the death penalty for sodomy, which was removed from the statute books only in 1861. When influential author and dramatist, Oscar Wilde, was jailed for two years’ hard labour for gross indecency in 1895, the judge, Mr Justice Wills, summed up the establishment
view of what being a man should entail. He compared Wilde’s ‘extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men’ with the standards of ‘decency and morality’ that ‘every man of honour’ should feel (Quoted in White, 1999, p.59). However, while this was the orthodox view, the Edwardian period saw a growing debate about homosexuality. Edward Carpenter, political activist and poet, exemplifies this best. His influential *The Intermediate Sex*, published in the Olympic year, aimed at promoting ‘knowledge and enlightened understanding of the subject’ amongst ‘medical men, teachers, parents, magistrates, judges, and the like’ (2007, p.5).

It is these contextual factors that make the 1908 Olympics so fascinating, as it is within this setting that any critique of Olympic conservatism, chauvinism, and heteronormativity has to take place.

At Athens in 1896, approximately 245 all-male competitors took part in nine sports (Mallon and Widlund, 1998). However, Lennartz (1994) has shown how two Greek women ran the Marathon route in the weeks around the Olympics as they were denied official entries. The Paris Olympics of 1900 formally included women’s events. Working with the notoriously unreliable records from these games, Mallon concludes that ten women competed in golf, seven in lawn tennis, three in croquet, and one each in the equestrian events and yachting, a total of 22 women. This first group of female Olympians comprised under 2% of the total entry alongside 1,235 men (Mallon, 1998, pp.26–27). At St Louis in 1904, there were fewer women, and they made up a smaller percentage of the total: six women, all of them American archers, compared to 624 men (Mallon, 1999a). Things were even more imbalanced at Athens in 1906: from a total of 847 competitors, only six were women – one Frenchwoman and five Greek women, all competing in the lawn tennis (Mallon, 1999b).

The numbers reflected the notion that sport was a male sphere. The sports themselves reinforced this. Men had the sports that embodied masculinity, variously testing speed, strength, endurance, discipline, technical ability, and teamwork. With the exception of the one anonymous woman who might have competed in the yachting at Paris, and the French horsewoman Elvira Guerra at Paris, the pre-1908 Olympic women all competed in the classically genteel sports of the period: lawn tennis, golf, croquet, and archery.

It was in this context that the BOC started work in 1906 when the IOC accepted London’s offer to host the 1908 Olympics. There were no IOC directives on which sports were to be open to either sex: the programming was based more on common sense and the hosts’ interests. This is why it is important to remember the British context as well as the precedent from previous Olympics and Coubertin’s masculine ideology. Hargreaves (1984, p.56) notes that ‘the entry of women into the Olympics occurred almost as an accident, part of the laissez-faire arrangements of the early years when authority was handed to the organising committees of the respective host countries, and before the IOC had made its administrative and policy-making procedures watertight’. She is right: but the context is important. The debate over women’s suffrage, the quiet discussions about male sexualities, the provision of team sports and gymnastics for females at private schools, polytechnics, and training colleges, the increasing presence of women in the workplace: these trends were all present in Britain at the time of the Olympic Games. This was the environment in which the planners conceived the most adventurous and experimental Olympic programme yet.

The BOC developed the programme in 1906 and 1907, and the IOC approved it at their meeting in The Hague in 1907 (Mallon and Buchanan, 2000, pp.6–8). The idea was to make it the biggest Olympic Games yet, and to include all that was best in British sporting culture. The programme also had an Edwardian flavour of mechanical innovation: and while aircraft flying and motor racing did not make it into the final version, motorboat racing did (Mallon and Buchanan, 2000, pp.6–8, 298–300). There is no evidence that the planners were leaving
women out or bringing them in: but the programme that they settled on, while overwhelm-
ingly male, also involved the highest number of women’s sports to date, and included men in
the dance-based sport of figure skating.

Using Mallon and Buchanan’s (2000) version of the programme alongside Theodore Cook’s
Official Report (1908), there were 24 competitive sports for men: archery, athletics, boxing,
cycling, diving, fencing, figure skating, football, gymnastics, hockey, jeu de paume, lacrosse,
lawn tennis, motorboating, polo, racquets, rowing, rugby union, shooting, swimming, tug-of-
war, water polo, wrestling, and yachting. All of these were open to men, and all of them tested
different characteristics that Edwardian society valued in the male, ranging from teamwork and
endurance to courage and technical ability. Then promoters used gendered language for their
descriptions of some sports: on gymnastics, for example, Cook argued that ‘Young men who do
not care to serve their country . . . might at least improve themselves, as citizens and fathers of
citizens to be, by regular gymnastic exercise’ (1908, p.196). Figure skating was the most clearly
aesthetic sport in the programme, although its dance-based structure was a setting for heteronor-
mative courting behaviour. In the vehicle-based sports of cycling, sailing, and motorboat racing,
men from different income brackets could show off their ability to control equipment and work
as technological sportsmen.

By contrast, the BOC provided only three competitive sports that were designated for women:
archery, figure skating, and lawn tennis. In archery, there were separate-sex events, attracting
32 men and 25 women. This was the only women’s competition to take place in the Great Sta-
dium. The lawn tennis competition, held at Wimbledon, consisted of men’s singles and doubles on
both open and covered courts, and women’s singles, also on both open and covered courts. There
was no mixed doubles, as there had been at Athens in 1906, and no women’s doubles. Overall,
50 men and 10 women took part. Figure skating was held at Prince’s Skating Club in Knights-
bridge in October. There were individual and special figure competitions for men, an individual
event for women, and a pairs skating competition, the only event at the 1908 Olympics where
men and women competed together. In all, 21 men and 7 women took to the ice.

As well as these events that were formally open to women, two other sports featured female
competitors: sailing and motorboat racing. In both cases, the presence of women seems to have
been accidental rather than planned. Two women were involved in the yachting, alongside 63
men. The first was Constance Edwina Cornwallis-West, Duchess of Westminster, who owned
the boat Sorais which came third in the 8 metre class race at Ryde. The Official Report lists her
only as the boat’s owner (Cook, 1908, p.339), but contemporary press coverage suggests a more
active role. The Field noted that she ‘sailed on board’ (1 August 1908, p.233), while the Daily
Mirror of 29 July included a photograph of the Duchess on her boat under the headline ‘Duch-
ess of Westminster Takes Part in Olympic Yacht Race’. Less ambiguous as a competitor was
Frances Rivett-Carnac, who crewed for her husband Charles on his 7 metre yacht, the aptly-
named Heroine, which won the class in a walkover. The third woman on the water was Mrs
John Marshall Gorman, whose own name is lost behind Edwardian marital convention. With
her husband, she raced Quicksilver in the B-Class motorboat event. She was the only woman
in this sport which attracted 13 men, a fact which The Times praised: ‘[Quicksilver] was steered
by Mr. Gorham, and it is worthy of special remark as an example of feminine endurance that
Mrs. Gorham was also on board’ (The Times, 29 August 1908, p.4; Mallon and Buchanan, 2000,
pp.200–204). These three women show some of the nuances at work in the 1908 Olympics:
it was not only the genteel and aesthetic sports that were open to females. This was, of course,
a class issue, as access to these sports depended upon disposable income and free time. These
women were the Olympic counterparts of the upper- and middle-class women of this period
who were mountaineering, skiing, and hunting.
Additionally, there were two demonstration events for women in diving and gymnastics. Both were competitive sports for men, so the experiment of adding a women’s programme was a statement of possible Olympic expansion. The gymnastics events were staged in the Great Stadium, with team displays by women from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden as part of the opening ceremony, and an additional exhibition two days later involving the Danes again, along with teams from the Northern Polytechnic Institute and the Yorkshire Amateur Gymnastic Association (Mallon and Buchanan, 2000, p.300). The diving exhibition involved only two women, Valborg Florström of Finland and Ebba Giscio of Sweden, which compares unfavourably with the 39 men, but was still revolutionary. It was the first time that women had competed in any swimming-based sports at the Olympics (Mallon and Buchanan, 2000, p.298), an important development considering the sport’s dress codes compared to the modest clothing worn by archers, tennis players, skaters, and sailors.

The programme was thus still male-dominated, but the number of sports in which women competed – five competitions plus two displays – was the biggest yet. The number of 45 women competing (40 of them British) was far higher than at any previous Games, but compares unfavourably to the 1,979 men. Women made up only 2.2% of the total: but when we note that the highest previous female presence was 21 at Paris, where women made up 1.9% of the field, the increase, though tiny, is visible.

How were the sportsmen and women received at the time? Newspaper reports for the men’s sports used a gendered vocabulary full of military metaphors and an emphasis on strength, stamina, and courage. The *Daily Express* (14 July 1908, p.7) described the ‘army of athletes’ at the opening ceremony. The *Daily Mirror* printed a spectacular action photograph of the diving, and praised the men for their ‘astonishing skill, grace and daring’ (25 July 1908, p.9), while *The Field* emphasised ‘power and precision’ in its report on the skater Ulrich Salchow (31 October 1908, p.790). Occasionally, journalists’ admiration for the men’s bodies veered from moral appreciation into something more homoerotically-charged, as in The *Daily Mail’s* description of the Scandinavian men at the opening ceremony: ‘They made walking a beautiful thing. Long and supple in limb and big-chested, the outline of their muscles quite traceable through their thin jerseys, they might have stood for the coming race’ (14 July 1908, p.3). The over-riding theme, whether expressed in aesthetic and eugenic terms or in the less-nuanced language of power and strength, was that the male athletes were real men, displaying valued masculine traits.

The coverage of the women was similarly orthodox. This starts with naming conventions. Women were referred to by their titles, like ‘Miss Newell’ in the archery (*Daily Mirror*, 20 July 1908, p.1) and skaters ‘Froken Montgomery’ and ‘Mrs Syers’ (*The Field*, 31 October 1908, p.790). Beyond that, the narratives of the women’s sports emphasised conventional femininity. *The Field*, for example, in the same report that stressed Salchow’s power, had this to say about the female skaters: ‘Mrs Syers . . . excelled in rhythm and time-keeping, and her dance steps, pirouettes, &c. were skated without a fault. Fräulein Rendschmidt’s skating was distinguished by a most engaging gaiety. She seemed quite at home on the ice, and danced through her programme in the happiest possible manner’ (31 October 1908, p.790).

This approach was clearest in the coverage of the Danish gymnasts, whose knee-length culottes meant that they revealed far more of their legs than any other female Olympians. All newspapers and magazines emphasised the gymnasts’ appearance as well as their performance in ways that ranged from the admiring to the salacious. It was no coincidence that all of the illustrated newspapers printed photographs of the gymnasts: indeed, they made the front page of the *Daily Mirror* (14 July 1908, p.1). *The Sphere* carried a side/rear view of 16 of the women bending forwards, with the caption ‘Gymnastic Display by Danish Women which Aroused great Enthusiasm’ (18 July 1908, p.52), and the *Illustrated London News* published a full page montage with
The 1908 London Olympic Games

11 action photographs of what it called the ‘Danish Dianas’ under the heading ‘The Drill that Makes Woman Physically Perfect’:

At the Olympic Games the most beautiful exhibition of gymnastics was given by the team of Danish girl athletes, who among all the competitors in the Stadium were unsurpassed for splendid physical development and grace of movement. The prettiness of their ‘ensemble’ was increased by their charming costume, which was of cream colour with amber stockings.

(25 July 1908, p.137)

The Daily Mirror also included a photograph, taken from below, of one of the gymnasts standing on one leg on the beam, along with a caption that verged on the voyeuristic: ‘Though a man-made law prevents ladies from competing in the Olympic Games, the spectators are occasionally treated to feats of feminine agility’ (17 July 1908, p.9).

It was not just the sporting stories that maintained gender stereotypes. Olympic-themed advertisements also reinforced the message. The Daily Mirror carried an advertisement for OXO beef stock on 14 July (p.6), endorsed by 68 male competitors under the heading ‘Let the experience of Britain’s healthiest sons teach you the value of OXO as a strengthener’: Britain’s daughters, healthy or otherwise, were not mentioned in this context of strength. The Daily Mail’s Olympic Supplement of 13 July carried a Sports & Games Association advertisement for boxing gloves, dumb bells, and Sandow’s Famous Developer alongside a preview of the athletics headed ‘The Best Men’ (Daily Mail, Olympic Games Supplement, 13 July 1908). The advertisement for Dr Martin’s Miracletts – ‘No case is too obstinate for this wonderful medicine’ – ran under the heading ‘Olympic Records. How are they made?’: ‘Men who feel weak and languid are gazing with half-expressed envy on the magnificent specimens of manhood who are breaking records and carrying home the laurels of fame.’ The ailments that this wonder tonic purported to cure included constipation and indigestion, as well as those enemies of Edwardian manliness, ‘laziness, weak nerves, [and] sleeplessness’ (Daily Mirror, 27 July 1908, p.13). Products and services aimed at women were rare in advertisements near the Olympic stories, save for the sumptuously-dressed croquet player in a Gamage’s spread in the Daily Mail on 13 July, and notices for Woodward’s Gripe Water in the Daily Express’s coverage of the Queen at the Olympic prize-giving ceremony (27 July 1908, p.7).

These press samples suggest that the sports of 1908 worked within predominant paradigms of how men and women should behave. The assumptions were all about heteronormativity, and about men and women having separate roles, separate interests, and bodies that needed to be treated in different ways. Mixed sex sport was there simply to allow both sexes to display these truths, and there was certainly no awareness of Carpenter’s ‘intermediate sex’. Any explicit references to emotional and/or sexual relationships assumed heterosexuality. So, for example, married couples who competed together, like the Gorhams in the motorboat racing or Madge and Edgar Syers in the figure skating, were admired as a norm. When the Italian Marathon runner Dorando Pietri took to the London stage to talk about his experiences, the Daily Mail revelled in the story of how ‘he received several letters from young ladies, demurely indicating that a proposal of marriage from him would receive favourable consideration’ (28 July 1908, p.3). Less pleasantly, Buchanan reports on how Dr Herbert Moran, the captain of the victorious Australian rugby union team, thought the greatest achievement of his team’s visit to England was not their Olympic medal, but that none of the players had contracted venereal disease (Buchanan, 1997, p.13).

Gender-specific patterns of representation were also evident in administrative and ceremonial settings. The BOC was all-male, under the leadership of Lord Desborough, and all of the
decision-making was in the hands of aristocratic and upper-middle class men. This makes the relatively high profile given to women’s sport more surprising: new ideas about women must have been pervasive to have persuaded such a conservative group of men to make these changes, which even included the designation of a Ladies Dressing Room in the Stadium (Cook, 1908, plan opposite p.13). However, while there were no women on the committees, they certainly had a presence in Olympic ceremonies. Queen Alexandra attended the opening ceremony with her husband, and presided over the prize-giving along with the Duchess of Rutland, the Duchess of Westminster, and Lady Desborough (Cook, 1908, p.370). The marathon started on the lawn at Windsor Castle, with the Princess of Wales giving the signal. Lady Desborough, the BOA’s President’s wife, gave prizes at Henley and attended Olympic banquets. Her biographer makes little of this, simply showing it as part of the round of a society wife (Davenport-Hines, 2008, pp.147–149). Royal and aristocratic women such as these perfectly fitted in with Coubertin’s vision of the social character of the Olympics.

The Queen, the Princess of Wales, and Lady Desborough may have been the archetypes of the applauding female, but visual evidence shows that plenty of other women watched the Games. Attendances in the stadium were low on some days, and turnstile evidence tells us nothing about gender, but women were present in all parts of the ground, with clothes and hats showing their status. The crowd at Henley for the all-male rowing regatta was mixed-sex. Just as interesting is the high number of women in the crowds that lined the streets for the marathon.

Other female archetypes were also evident in the 1908 Olympics prizes. The certificates featured women dressed in ancient Greek clothing, as did the Diploma of Merit (Cook, 1908, opposite pp.18–19). The medals depicted St George killing the dragon in front of a half-naked princess on the reverse, and two women draped in ancient Greek costumes crowning a naked male athlete with laurels on the obverse (Cook, 1908, opposite p.30; Polley, 2011, p.113). These representations fitted in well with Coubertin’s ideal of women doing nothing more in the Olympics than rewarding the men.

Overall, then, the politics of gender and sexuality at the 1908 Olympics were nuanced and ambiguous. The Games were overwhelmingly male, evident in the type of sports, the number of competitors, the composition of decision-making bodies, and the tone of the press coverage; and yet they involved more women, and more sports for women, than any previous Olympics had done. The male sports remained rooted in the IOC’s Faster, Higher, Stronger culture, and yet they included fancy diving and figure skating; and while the sports for women were predictably genteel, three women competed in the more demanding yachting and motorboat racing. Theodore Cook, in the BOC’s Official Report, reflected on these developments:

The successful appearance of ladies in these competitions suggests the consideration that since one of the chief objects of the revived Olympic Games is the physical development and amelioration of the race, it appears illogical to adhere so far to classical tradition as to provide so few opportunities for the participation of a predominant partner in the process of race-production. More events . . . might be open to women, whether they are permitted to compete with men or not. . . . They have competed in skating, archery, and lawn tennis in the Olympic Games. Perhaps it may be worth considering whether in future Olympiads they may not also enter for swimming, diving, and gymnastics, three branches of physical exercise in which they gave most attractive displays during the Games in London. In rifle-shooting, and possibly in other sports, they may also have a fair chance of success in open competitions.

(Cook, 1908, p.295)
The attitude may have come straight from the contemporary moral panic of the Physical Deterioration debate (Inter-Departmental Committee of Physical Deterioration, 1904), but this official BOA statement signals a clear shift in Olympic attitudes towards women. While Coubertin remained staunchly opposed to more women’s sports, his ideas were fast becoming obsolete in an age of changing attitudes towards women’s social, political, economic, and cultural positions. The fact that women’s diving and swimming were introduced as medal events at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912 shows how quickly attitudes were changing. The 1908 Olympics thus gave women new opportunities, and set a path for future expansion. However, it is also important to stress that gender was just part of the structure of inequalities operating in these Olympics. While some men from working-class backgrounds competed in the boxing, cycling, athletics, and swimming, the only women able to access the offered sports were from middle and upper class backgrounds. The costs of these sports, and their social character, ensured that no working class women could hope to compete. Again, this changed when swimming was introduced at Stockholm in 1912. Indeed, Britain’s first individual female swimming medalist, Jennie Fletcher, trained around her manual job in a Leicester factory. As with gender, class constraints gradually changed after London 1908. These Olympics thus stand as a fascinating case study in the politics of gender and sexuality in Olympic history. In 1908, we can see old attitudes and practices being contested by new ways of thinking. Coubertin’s vision of ‘male athleticism’ and ‘female applause’ still had currency: but its days were numbered.

**References**

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**Bibliography**


